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Khyati Y. Joshi and Jigna Desai, eds. *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Immigration in the South.*

Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis

Even though one cannot judge the book by its cover, *Asian Americans in Dixie's* cover poignantly captures the book's subject matter. The patchwork shape of the Southern states made from pieces of Asian fabric visually underscores the rich ethnic and national heterogeneity of Asians and Asian-Americans in the South and completes the full title of the book, which was awarded a *Choice* Outstanding Academic Title in 2014. *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Immigration in the South* is the thirty sixth addition to the *Asian American Experience* series. This interdisciplinary series has been published by University of Illinois Press since 1992. The series, edited by Eiichiro Azuma, Jigna Desai, Martin F. Manalansan IV, Lisa Sun-Hee Park, and David K. Yoo, offers sophisticated scholarly debates on sociology, religion, anthropology, history, gender studies, visual culture, literary studies and political science.

Asian Americans in Dixie is a triumph of collaborative work by fourteen contributors working within areas as distant as documentary films, women, sexuality, performance studies, religious oppression, racial and ethnic relations, and migration, all with connections to Asian American studies. Khyati Y. Joshi, an associate professor in the College of Education at Fairleigh Dickinson University and author of *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America*, and Jigna Desai, an associate professor of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies and Asian American Studies at the University of Minnesota, and author of *The Bollywood Reader* and *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*, have edited a very accomplished volume which looks at the American South through the analytical angle of racial subjectivity and in-betweenness, or "racial interstitiality" –an idea put forward by Leslie Bow.

Even though Asian American studies is a burgeoning field, a claim which may be supported by citing Asian American series published by various University Presses,¹ *Asian Americans in Dixie* is a path-breaking intervention. This multidisciplinary collection of

essays benefits from cross-fertilization among ethnic, Southern, and American studies literature. The editors should be applauded for this fresh and accomplished crosspollination among those disciplines. As they pointedly remark, book-length studies of Asian Americans outside the East and West Coast dyad are not particularly numerous,² making this anthology an important addition to such scholarship. The book approaches the Asian American presence in Southern states from three interrelated and cross-linked perspectives that function as dividing sections. The first organizing theme investigates the relation between “Disrupting race and place.” The second overreaching theme is the analysis of “Community formation and profiles,” while the subsequent section accentuates the historical and contemporary significance of “Performing race, region, and nation.” All three parts “explore the intersections of racial formation, immigration, religion, gender, and community formation both past and present” (23).

Asian Americans in Dixie opens with “Discrepancies in Dixie: Asian Americans and the South,” an informative and thoroughly researched introductory essay in which the editors clearly state and logically develop the methodological premise of the anthology: they want “to think about the significance of Asian American migration to, racial formations within, and community formations in the South as well as the epistemological and intellectual questions raised about the region and space” (23). Instead of simply going beyond a California-centric paradigm, the editors are interested in “how the South as a transnational space raises its own questions, concerns, histories, and arguments for Asian American studies” (23). Desai and Joshi manifest copious and fascinating knowledge about frequent, but transient, Asian-American scholarship about the South, and the lack of Southern research into Asian-American scholarship. Their compelling comparison of Asian Americans and the South yields the fascinating observation that both share an exceptional and anomalous status within American studies. Concentrating on demographics and epistemology, the editors place Asian American subjects within the context of transnationalism, the racialization of Whites, and Afro-Asian connections, as well as the epistemological discourse based on “erasure, elision, and disappearance.”

Desai and Joshi inscribe Asian Americans into the imagined South: the binary white-black South, the Christian normativity of the South, and the temporal and spatial disconnectedness of the South with the rest of the country and the world. By way of imaginative and fruitful explorations, the editors define Asian migration to the South via “three major global forces that have shaped modernity: capitalism, colonialism, and nationalism” within the context of the Caribbean, Latin American and Atlantic worlds. They also offer imaginative and fruitful explorations of the Afro-Asian South against the backdrop of discourses of Orientalism and anti-Black racism, as well as of Asian and Latino racial formations within US colonialism in general and particularly in the South. Compelling presentations of Asians complicating the white-black binary and a changing conception of the racial category of Asian also receive a forceful presentation.

This excellent introductory essay, which reveals the expansive breadth of the editors’ expertise, welds the collection of essays together. However, the reader might have welcomed shorter introductory statements at the beginning of each section, which could even be simply extracted from the introduction (“Emerging Communities” could just as well precede Part II), and a short unifying and comparative final conclusion about the issues discussed.

The first section of the volume – “Disrupting Race and Place” – begins with an essay entitled “Selling the East in the American South: Bengali Muslim Peddlers in New

Orleans and Beyond, 1880-1920,” in which Vivek Bald draws our attention to Asian immigration into the South, specifically to Bengali peddlers. He embeds his discussion in the wider context of Oriental sentiments (xenophobic attitudes towards China, as opposed to Orientalist fantasies of India). Vivek explains the significance of New Orleans and other southern seaboard cities for Bengali men within the historical and economic circumstances – not as final destinations, but rather as stops on a global migration.

In the next article, “Racial Interstitiality and the Anxieties of the ‘Partly Colored’: Representations of Asians under Jim Crow,” Leslie Bow explores the status and evolution of the third race – “partly colored” or “almost white” – which complicates the white/black binary of the segregated South. She focuses more narrowly on the social and cultural consequences of Chinese Americans’ caste elevation from colored to white status. Bow frames the discussion of Asian American presence in the South through the perspective of racial interstitiality (between black and white) and incommensurability between the race and class status of Chinese Americans in the South. She poignantly analyses how “interstitial populations serve to unveil the mechanisms, political processes, and stakes behind the making of status” (71) – the status of Asian Americans in particular, as “American but not quite; as middle class – almost; as minority but not one of ‘those’ minorities; as like us but not like us” (72).

Amy Brandzel’s and Jigna Desai’s essay “Racism without Recognition: Toward a Model of Asian American Racialization” is a provocative reconsideration of Asian American masculinity and racial formation. Their contribution offers a re-examination of the mass violence at Virginia Tech perpetrated by Seung-Hui Cho, a Korean American. The authors, referring to their earlier work, see Cho’s status of “racially othered as an Asian immigrant alien and whitened as disenfranchised male youth” (77) within “the dominant narrative of a wounded *white* heteromascularity” (78). They prove that such a perception of Cho precludes reading him “as a disabled representative of politically, culturally, and economically disenfranchised people of color vengefully and violently expressing his dislocation from citizenship, rights, and belonging in the United States.” (78). Brandzel and Desai also bring to discussion Cho’s supposedly violent homosexuality and autism in the context of a postracial and transnational South.

The second part of the volume, entitled “Community Formation and Profiles,” begins with Daniel Bronstein’s contribution entitled “Segregation, Exclusion, and the Chinese Communities in Georgia, 1880s-1940s.” The author explores the impact of the exclusion laws – federally sanctioned anti-Chinese discrimination – on the Chinese merchant communities in three cities in Georgia. He shows how the racial politics of the Jim Crow system, and the state legislature in particular, attempted to prevent the reunification of Chinese families as well as their entering and re-entering the US, in general “having very little legal acknowledgement of their racial status” (124).

The next essay, Arthur Sakamoto, ChangHwan Kim, and Isao Takei’s “Moving out of the Margins and into the Mainstream: The Demographics of Asian Americans in the New South,” is a rich exploration of the shift in Asian American demographics. It is the result of scrupulous analysis of such variables as population sizes, multicultural and ethnic diversity, migration patterns, socioeconomic statistics and geographic distribution in two different data sources, the U.S. Census of 2000 and the American Community Survey (of 2005 and 2006). A twofold shift is revealed: geographic and socioeconomic. Supported by a wealth of data, the authors prove Asian American migration to the South

to be emblematic of the movement from the geographic margins (California and Hawaii) to the mainstream (the New South).

“Natives of a Ghost Country: The Vietnamese in Houston and Their Construction of a Postwar Community” is a case study of socioeconomic factors which attracted immigrants to “the ‘golden buckle’ of the Sunbelt.” Roy Vu examines the racial marginalization of Houston’s Vietnamese community, the third largest in the U.S., and their strategies to counteract it. Vy explores how Vietnamese Houstonians “construct an identity via community formation strategies such as... 1) organizing to challenge the racialization of Vietnamese Americans from whites and marginalized minorities, 2) redeeming transhistorical Southern Vietnamese nationalism..., 3) creating spatiality or ‘making space’” (166).

“Standing Up and Speaking Out: Hindu Americans and Christian Normativity in Metro Atlanta” takes the volume to the end of the divagations about establishing and strengthening Asian American communities. Khyati Y. Joshi’s contribution widens the focus of the anthology’s analysis to include the presence of Hindu Americans in a Southern landscape peppered with Chick-fill-A’s and megachurches. She analyses the impact of the conflation of Christianity and whiteness in the U.S. on Indian American Hindus in the metropolitan area. This impact consists of “patterns of oppression by neglect, omission, erasure, and distortion” (191). She locates the response of “Concerned Citizens,” a group of Indian American Hindus in Metro Atlanta joined with Hindus in other states, to professor Paul Courtwright’s analysis of the Hindu deity Ganesh within the socio-cultural context of the Hindu community in the South. This 20-year-old academic publication epitomized a misrepresentation of Hinduism in academic and popular discourse. Joshi studied the Courtwright controversy within diasporic Hindu communities across the USA and transnational world in general.

Jennifer Ho’s essay “Southern Eruptions in Asian American Narratives” begins the third and last section “Performing Race, Region, and Nation.” Ho’s contribution is devoted to an analysis of Susan Choi’s *The Foreign Student*, Mira Nair’s film *Mississippi Masala*, and Paisley Rekdal’s creative non-fiction work “Travel to Opal” through the lens of racially ambiguous subjects located in the new “New South” which erupts “as a force of violence, shame, and the redemption inherent in change” (220). Ho deconstructs how Asian Americans “trouble this [black-white] binary with their seemingly ‘foreign’ presence and their position as being both within and without this southern history” (220). According to Ho, Asian presence in the South renders the region transnational and global, unlike the North-South dyad which makes it provincial and isolated. She concludes her essay by observantly stating that “Asian American stories set in the South erupt the myth of imaginary lines between the past and present, reminding us that the inclusion of Asian American voices signals not simply pluralistic affirmation of racial harmony but the complications of understanding race beyond a black-white paradigm” (235).

Henry Cho’s performances as a stand-up comedian (*What’s That Clickin’ Noise?* 2006) and actor are the subject of Jasmine Kar Tang’s contribution “‘A Tennessean in an Unlikely Package’: The Stand-up Comedy of Henry Cho.” The author probes questions about how the entertainer “performatively manages his social location as a racialized Asian American of the U.S. South” (245). Tang posits that Cho’s originality in comedy is based on the unexpected, rather than anomalous or aberrant presence of a racialized subject in a show-biz representation. Having analyzed Cho’s performative use of his racial

in-betweenness, Tang arrives at a conclusion that instead of simply exposing (cultural/ linguistic) authenticity, Cho's (comic) representation of his racial subjectivity may "mitigate discomfort about racial difference among mainstream white audiences" (258). Provocatively, Tang identifies Cho's positionality not as "either/or" but as "both-and" within "dominant narratives of the U.S. South and Asian America" (258).

The anthology of essays ends with Marguerite Nguyen's contribution "'Like We Lost Our Citizenship': Vietnamese Americans, African Americans, and Hurricane Katrina." Nguyen compares the model minority rhetoric and representations of Vietnamese as refugees in pre-Katrina New Orleans to (inter)national media discourse about the recovery of Vietnamese-American citizens from the hurricane in 2005. Pitting African-Asian relations against the backdrop of the changing socio-economic situation in the Crescent City, Nguyen narrates how "interracial antagonism became interracial cooperation" (265).

The scope of the project and diverse methodologies employed in various contributions make *Asian Americans in Dixie* a useful addition to the scholar's library. This anthology of essays will be a luminous reference for scholars and students alike interested in Asian American and Southern studies (adopting various analytical lenses of history, sociology, cultural and/or literary studies), as well as American studies in general. The essays are cohesively linked to one another via the understanding and renditions of Asian American's interstitiality in the South. Each individual study contributes extensively to the ultimate success of the anthology. Readers will benefit from reading the whole collection in its entirety due to its overreaching themes. The volume is timely and relevant to the emerging debates about immigration, transnationalism, and globalization within American Studies. It will be the foundational book about the Asian-American South in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. Apart from *The Asian American Experience* at University of Illinois Press, the field encompasses *Studies in Asian Americans: Reconceptualizing Culture, History, and Politics* (a Routledge series), *Asian American History and Culture* (Temple University Press), *Asian and Pacific American Transcultural Studies* (University of Hawai'i Press), and *Asian Americans of Achievement* (Chelsea House Publishers).
2. Actually, the first and so far the only book-length research devoted to Asian Americans in the South was published by Leslie Bow, one of the volume's contributors. It is *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South*, 2010.

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